POCKET OBSERVATION

An Attention Reclamation Project

Volume 1

Hello. My name is Meg Conley. I am a writer, mother and observer. My work appears in places like Harper's Bazaar, The Guardian, BBC and NPR. I create one half of Pocket Observation. The other half is created by you. I am grateful we get to be observant together.

Scan the QR code to follow along as I work through this Pocket Observation. Through that link you will find exclusive writing, audio notes, free art, recommended resources and fillable PDF version of this Pocket Observation. You will also find other issues of Pocket Observation available for download.

Not into QR codes? I get it! Just head to https://pocketobservatory.org/pocket-observation

This book features two typefaces. *Tech School* by Beth Mathews and *Goodchild* by Nick Shinn and Nicolas Jenson

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This is a Pocket Observation

Each Pocket Observation contains a curriculum designed to help you reclaim your attention, preserve information and facilitate knowledge sharing. Engage with the curriculum, but do not feel confined to it.

This Pocket Observation can be printed at home. It requires just 4 sheets of paper. It can be bound with staples or strings. Consider adding a decorative cover.

Pocket Observations can also be kept in a digital space. A fillable pdf version is available via the QR code on the opposite page.

As you interact with this Pocket Observation, it will be transformed into a piece of your personal archive. Add blank pages, write in the margins, tape in ephemera, sketch impressions.

Records require context. This usually includes names, dates, locations. Sometimes this is not advised. For example, if you're making a record of reproductive healthcare activism in an anti-abortion state. Add context safely and creatively. Use pseudonyms, the time of day instead of a date, emotional atmosphere instead of location.

Set a aside a spot for your archive - a single shelf or storage box will do. Do not digitize records unless it is safe to do so.

Pocket Observation is made under a Creative Commons license that allows you to redistribute this booklet for non-commercial purposes. Print a few booklets, add a handwritten message if you like and leave them in community spaces.

Set a fixed Pocket Observation period. At the end of the observation period, ask yourself what information you are missing. What else do you need/want to know about the ideas you've been considering? Include your answer in your archive.

Start a Pocket Observation Club. Gather at the end of each Observation period to share what you've observed. Exchange useful information - book lists, how-to guides, recipes, articles, study guides.

Dear Observer,

I've been trying to process the future since I was a kid. If I could just see what's coming, I could understand how to keep my family safe. My insides are always softly whirring, struggling to render an accurate model of the approaching space and time. When things are very uncertain, the whirring turns into a roar, my hands tremble, my teeth clack.

In the months after the 2024 United States presidential election, it felt like I might shake apart. The day the Trump administration took down the first archives, my insides went still. I could see what's coming.

In my nation's capital, a coalition of Christian Nationalists, Tech Reactionaries and Trumpists are installing an authoritarian government. They claim their gender, race and class gives them absolute authority over hundreds of millions of people.

Authoritarian regimes can't justify their claims in an information-abundant environment. Information enclosure must precede systemic dispossession. Authoritarians always start by pulling down the archives, stopping the research, and banning books. I understand why others might not recognize what government erasure of public information foretells. So many of us have been misled about the way information functions in our lives.

As a child, my textbook timelines taught me to conflate information with technology. The Stone Age humans battered their world into shape with rocks. I lived during a more evolved age, humans used information systems to engineer the world. My education trained me to optimize information retrieval but neglected to teach me how to detect significance. I learned information could exist apart from people. Documents could create, maintain and defend institutions. I was told to buy into a world where information enclosure generated exponential growth.

I couldn't have even if I wanted to – others got there first. Private interests manufactured information-scarcity in the decades before

Trump's ascendancy. Libraries, newspapers and community spaces were hollowed out by private equity. Higher education became the handmaiden of financialization. Misinformation is distributed by algorithms aligned with billionaire interest. The details of our lives were relabeled data, a euphemism that gave corporate agents permission to exploit our connections. Digital decay devours crowdsourced knowledge while AI slop seeps through search. In this environment, archives exist to be erased.

And here, Dear Observer, you might think, "Yes, Meg. It is bad and sad to lose our histories and our research and our books. But many things are bad and sad right now. Why should I care particularly about information-scarcity? And what can I possibly do about it?" These are the very questions I've set out to answer.

First, I can tell you why information matters so desperately. And then I can tell you one thing you can do about. I found both answers by searching through public archives.

What happens when information is kept from us?

By the mid-twentieth century, advances in information technology facilitated efficient knowledge sharing across communities, borders and great distances. These interactions produced new ways to capture and release energy. World powers began treating scientific discovery as "the most essential of warlike activities in a time of peace." Information was controlled, commoditized and classified.

Just a few years before his death, Albert Einstein cried out, "the field of information unceasingly shrinks under the pressure of military necessity." An answer to our first question is found in the layers of this lament.

Einstein taught us that the energy-matter content of the universe never changes. He also said that existence depends on change – energy transforming into matter and matter transforming into energy. These transformations produce all the variation we see – stars, mountains, your most beloved person. These transformations also produce all the variation we cannot see – quarks, dark matter, the space that

once held your most beloved person.

This brings us to one of Einstein's biggest ideas: Reality is not created by the fundamental fact of energy and matter. Instead, reality is created by the relationships between energy and matter. The more relationships, the more expansive reality becomes.

Now. Imagine a field of information that grows as it encompasses difference communities that know and ask different things. As people interact with information, things change. These transformations produce every piece of the human-made world – goods, social structures, your most beloved person. A large field of information means more transformative relationships. As Einstein watched power shrink the field of information, he understood he was watching reality shrink too.

Authoritarians must shrink the field of information so they can diminish and dominate reality. Destroying archives and banning books is never enough because documents don't consider meaning – communities do. Authoritarians try to use closed systems to separate people from shared meaning. But no system containing humans can ever be closed to information leaks. Not even the blockchain.

The human ability to detect significance and consider it within the context of the past, present and future is species unique. Homo Sapiens seem to have emerged alongside meaning. We have always been Children of the Information Age.

And so, after the archives are torn apart, authoritarians destroy us too. People, especially children, die when information scarcity is imposed by the government. This is intentional. Each loss depletes a community's ability to process reality beyond authoritarianism's fragile framework.

We need to keep our world too big to be captured by their code. For most of us, this work will manifest through small acts we perform every day, with the skills and resources we have at hand. Every action their program can't easily compute is an action that drains their power.

One of the things that can be done

As you find ways to act outside their authoritarian script, I am asking you to include the work of preserving information and cultivating shared meaning. Keep records of what you know, what you learn, what you observe. Find communities where you can give and receive knowledge.

Mariame Kaba, activist, author and archivist, includes record keeping, educational pamphlet making and community knowledge sharing in *Some Actions that Are Not Protesting or Voting*. It can be difficult to know how to do that work. That's where Pocket Observation comes in

This Pocket Observation is the first document in a personal archive we are each going to build. These booklets will help us preserve our dispersed knowledge in a systematic, unhackable, accessible way. I will post my own observations on Pocket Observatory throughout the month. Simply scan the QR code on the title page of this booklet to read my observations.

What will we do with the records we keep? Well, I expect they'll sit on our shelves where we can reach for them when we need them. Someday the archives will go back up. Maybe some Pocket Observations will end up on those shelves. But there is the hope of something more in my request.

As we keep and share meaning, we create relationships that extend reality beyond limited men's limited horizons. What will that reality hold? I can't be sure.

But I think the answer includes an epigram found in the margins of Octavia E. Butler's archive,

"There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns."

Love, Meg

With this Pocket Observation we will

1. Remember that information is our human inheritance

2. Consider what we know and how we know it

3. Think about the positive impact of information technology

4. Learn what documents are and what documents can never be

5. Understand how authoritarians use documentation technology to obscure information + control individuals

6. Remember why authoritarians fail

7. Practice preserving, sharing and seeking information

8. Practice seeking information

1. Information is our human inheritance

Information is a word we use to describe many things. Here, we are talking about information in the sense of *human experience* and *human knowing*.

Sensing significant developments in the environment and seeking to influence others - becoming informed and informing others - are basic to survival.

- Michael Buckland, Information and Society

A very simple example: I am on a walk with my young child. We reach a cross walk. I know the significance of **Do Not Walk** *and* **Walk** *signals. I also know that people driving cars do not always heed signals. Even when a* **Walk** *signal flashes, I must look both ways for cars before crossing the street. I share this information with my child. She turns that information into knowledge. She is now able to understand and heed the signals. She is less likely to be hit by a car, even when I cannot walk with her.*

Information cannot be separated from meaning. And meaning cannot exist apart from human understanding.

Human knowing is not restricted to what must be understood for basic survival. Love is a kind of information. So is hate.

Humans have a species-unique ability to consider information within the context of the past, present and future.

Not all information is true. Humans must trust information for it to become knowledge. Information doesn't have to be true to lead to knowledge or belief.

We trust information that comes from trusted people, communities and institutions. Trust is a reciprocal relationship that requires constant nurturing.

2. What we know and how we know it

Knowledge is not the same thing as information.

Only an individual can know something. When that individual dies, their knowing dies with them. Information can survive in other members of their community. And so what was known by one person can be known by many others.

What each of us knows is a significant component of our culture. Our knowledge, modes of communication and ways of reasoning are culturally situated in our personal small world, and even the smallest personal world is complex.
- Michael Buckland, Information and Society

Every society is made up of many different communities. And every individual belongs to many different communities. Different communities know different things.

For example: People who belong to the American Chestnut Foundation know how to identify an American Chestnut. Southern Californians know about the Santa Ana winds. Elementary school children know where to line up after recess. A family knows their matriarch makes the best pecan pie in the world.

What a community knows or believes has consequences for people inside and outside of the community.

3. Information technology diminishes the effects of space and time.

Writing, copying and printing are kinds of information technology. Writing down what we know, copying what others have written down, printing many copies of one document - these are all technological innovations that make it possible to share and protect information.

4. Documents are not information

Documents are the cultural objects that signify meaning.

An object is only a document if it is perceived as signifying something.

Suzanne Briet,* a pioneer of information science, said that anything can serve as a document as long as it conveys meaning.

A piece of paper with text is a document, a mother's raised eyebrow is a document. a uniform is a document. a Pocket Observation is a document. a cave wall covered in neolithic art is a document. a salute is a document, a computer program is a document. a ***Do Not Walk*** *sign is a document.*

All societies are information societies. Societies become dependent on documents as the division of labor becomes more complex. Trusted documents stand-in for first-hand knowledge.

A very simple example: My family does not grow our own food. We buy our food from grocery stores and markets. I am not present at the harvest, processing, or shipping of any of that food. My oldest daughter is allergic to nuts. We depend on ingredient labels — documents — to make sure the food we purchase is nut-free. I trust the ingredient labels because I know that my country has a federal agency that regulates and enforces food labeling.

An object cannot be a document if it does not convey meaning to a person.

Documents cannot be separated from human understanding. (No matter what the LLM maximalists say!)

Documents can only be indirect and imperfect records of human knowing and experience because "documents are not people."

***Suzanne Briet was known as Madame Documentation. She earned the title.**

5 The authoritarians are trying to use documents against us

Understanding what is known in a community is necessary to predict how the community will react, adapt and adopt. There is an incentive to find out what is known in a community. And the ability to influence a community is a source of serious power.

Increasingly, there is a shift from individuals deriving benefits from the use of documents to documentary regimes seeking to influence, control and benefit from individuals.
- *Michael Buckland, Information and Society*

Social media platforms like Instagram are proto-documentary regimes. Posts, likes, and comments are all documents. Those documents are collected into data sets. Those data sets are anaylzed to discover what is known in a community. Algorithms, another type of document, are used to influence what is known in a community.

Authoritarians want to use documentation technology to impose tech-enabled feudalism. They want to use property tech and internet surveillance to document all of our behavior. They want to use LLMs to process those documents to learn everything we know. They want to use AI slop to obscure information. They want to use single-source of truth aggregation to change what we know. They want to force our economic and legal systems onto the blockchain so they can distibute subjuguation.

The authoritarians think they can use documents to understand and to control us because they think humans are like large language models. They think they can train us on data sets and use prompt engineering to refine our responses.

6. The authoritarians will fail

People are not machines. The authoritarian program cannot process the human experience. It cannot compute love, laughter, grief, joy and hope. It does not comprehend care work. It can't fathom memories or visions. It can't capture the meaning of a family recipe, a rock collection, an inside joke. Preserving humane information and fostering shared meaning is one way to exhaust authoritarian power.

7. Practice preserving and sharing information
Use the lined pages at the back of this booklet to write observations in response to these prompts

Different communities know different things. Think about one of your communities. What is something you know because of your membership in that community? Who else in the community knows what you know?

Make an (incomplete!) list of objects that serve as documents in your life. What does the object mean to you? Does it signify that same meaning to others?

We are living in a time when the field of information unceasingly shrinks under the pressure of those interested in domination. Survey the field of information from a local perspective - what information is being made scarce in your community?

Allow yourself to imagine living under a new sun. What information would have to be accessible for that new sun to exist? How can you start preserving and sharing that information now?

8. Practice seeking information

Checking out books from your local library is a great way to help maintain an expansive information field. Make a list of books you'd like to read this year.

Engage with community archives in your region. How can you support them?

Choose a topic you'd like to know more about - gardening, astronomy, mutual aid, miniatures, anything! Find ways to learn about the topic in a community setting. Not sure where to begin? Go to your local library or community college and ask about upcoming workshops.

When we preserve and share information, we expand our means of creation.

Observations

Observations

There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns

Octavia E. Butler